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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the working conditions that teachers face in an urban school district in the southern United States are presented in this paper. A survey mailed to 1,329 teachers in 15 secondary and 68 elementary schools produced an approximate 50 percent response rate per school. Interviews were also conducted with the union building representative from four elementary and two high schools. Teachers reported problems concerning textbook availability and functional equipment, school safety, and student discipline--conditions more likely to inhibit rather than foster student learning and school reform. However, some teachers defied the inadequacies of their work environment by developing collegial working relationships. A conclusion is that pedagogy in the schools cannot be changed in schools where there is a textbook shortage, where teachers feel distanced from school reform, and where teachers perceive their school boards and administrators to be unconcerned. If successful school restructuring is to occur, school conditions must be addressed first. Five tables are included. (Contains 16 references.) (LMI)

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Teacher Working Conditions and School Reform: A Descriptive Analysis

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Running head: Working Conditions

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Abstract

Teachers' working conditions are seldom the focus of reform oriented research and writing. Yet, teachers in many urban schools confront conditions that include student violence, inadequate supplies of textbooks and other materials, and badly deteriorating buildings. Such conditions are unlikely to provide fertile ground for the restructuring reforms being proposed. This paper investigates the working conditions teachers face in an urban district in the south. The paper concludes that until conditions in schools are addressed, attempts at restructuring will not have widespread success.

Academic discussions about school reform typically focus on such issues as school based management, shared decision making, and professionalizing teaching. Teachers' working conditions, especially conditions in urban districts, are largely ignored in the reform literature and research. Yet, a study by Ginsberg Schwartz, Olson, and Bennett (1987) indicates that poor working conditions are more the norm than the exception in urban schools. The few studies of teachers' working conditions which have been conducted indicate that in some schools teachers face an environment that includes discipline problems (Casner-Lotto, 1987), neighborhood violence (Ginsberg et al., 1987), a lack of textbooks and supplies (Bacharach, Bauer, & Shedd, 1986; McLaughlin & Yee, 1988), burdensome paperwork that is irrelevant to student learning (Apple, 1983; Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985), and dilapidated buildings (Ornstein & Levine, 1989). With regard to school reform, Elmore (1987) cautions that permanent change is improbable if the attempted reforms "fail to take account of the constraints under which teachers work" (p. 66). Therefore, change advocates would be wise to consider that serious and sustained attention to ameliorating the conditions under which teachers work may be a necessary prerequisite to genuine reform.

Despite its importance to the success of restructuring efforts, the omission of teachers' working conditions from the reform literature can be traced to three likely factors. First, working conditions as a variable of study has been consigned almost exclusively to the labor-management domain. The assumption is that

these issues are resolved at the bargaining table, though research does not support a significant link between the two (Goldschmidt & Painter, 1988). Second, suitable working conditions are often taken for granted by reformers who ascribe the condition of the work environment to the level of a hygiene factor as described by Herzberg (1968), and therefore devote scant attention to the topic in their writing. An assumption in this case apparently is that any district or school serious about restructuring, will also provide reasonable working conditions. Third, the attitude toward teachers manifested by many in the research community is that teachers are "peripheral" to research (Atkin, 1989, p. 200), making their working conditions unimportant as a research topic.

Thus, the flurry of reform activity for the past decade notwithstanding, conditions in which the reforms are expected to flourish are often overlooked. At the same time, conditions in some schools have deteriorated to the point that teachers' work environment has been called "harsh" (Ginsberg et al., 1987, p. 4) and even "primitive" (Provenza, McClosky, Kottkamp, & Cohen, 1990, p. 567). The current paper presents a descriptive analysis of data that examines the conditions under which teachers work in an urban setting and explores the beliefs of teacher leaders in selected schools regarding their understanding of both working conditions and school reform.

Method

Sample

The present study took place in one of the 60 largest

districts in the country. Located in the Deep South, the district has over 4,000 teachers and 80,000 students in some 120 schools. Students in the district come largely from low socio-economic backgrounds, although a number of magnet schools attract more affluent students who might otherwise enroll in one of the many non-public schools in the geographic area. While there is not a district promulgated reform agenda in this system, over 50 national, state, and local reform initiatives are underway (Bogotch, Brooks, McPhee, & Riedlinger, 1992). Among these initiatives are the Accelerated Schools program (Brandt, 1992), the Comer program, and schools that have undertaken reform initiatives on their own (Taylor, 1992).

The sample includes 1,329 teachers from 15 secondary schools and 68 elementary schools who returned a questionnaire which was distributed via the interschool mail system. Qualitative data were also obtained for analysis. Structured interviews were conducted with the union building representative in four elementary schools and two high schools. With the exception of one of these schools, each had a response rate over 50% on the quantitative measure.

In the interviews, teachers were asked to describe what, in their opinion, working conditions and school reform mean. They were also asked about the working conditions at their school and to describe how those conditions helped and/or hindered their teaching. With permission, five of the six interviews were recorded and the interviews transcribed and analyzed. One interviewee declined to be recorded; in this case, verbatim notes

made by the researcher were analyzed.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire used in this study examined teachers' perceptions of their working conditions in several areas: class size and teaching load; timeliness of receiving textbooks, sufficiency of materials, and condition of equipment; physical conditions of the school and classroom, and safety; and, at the secondary level, discipline. Because conditions in elementary and secondary schools differ, particularly with respect to the types of classroom materials needed and the severity of discipline problems, slightly different questionnaires were used for elementary and secondary teachers. Elementary teachers completed a 42 item instrument, while secondary teachers received a questionnaire with 54 items.

Results

Class Size and Teaching Load

In keeping with previous research by Bacharach et al. (1986), frequencies are reported for the quantitative data. With regard to class size, respondents indicate that their classes generally remain below 35 students (96% of the elementary teachers have fewer than 34 students in class, and 59% of the secondary teachers have 32 or fewer students); however, 71% of the secondary teachers note that they teach six periods a day, giving some a daily student load as high as 180 students. The high number of teaching periods is offset somewhat by limiting the number of preparations required. Most secondary teachers (74%) have one or two preparations and 91%

teach within their areas of certification.

Books, Materials, and Equipment

Regarding textbooks and materials, Table 1 shows that textbook availability is a problem in this district. Less than 50% of the teachers have textbooks available for distribution on the first day of school. And although most teachers had distributed texts by the second week of school, about one fourth of the elementary teachers and over one fourth of the secondary teachers did not received sufficient texts by the third week of school.

The availability of supplies and equipment shows little improvement. Just over three-fourths of the secondary respondents receive enough desks, leaving roughly another quarter without desks for all of the students in their class. Likewise, a meager one-fifth of those who teach art, social studies, math, and science in secondary schools have the supplies necessary to teach their subject. In addition, a relatively small minority of teachers at both levels agreed that they have adequate amounts of paper and pencils, indicating that most teachers must seek to obtain the resources by other means. To supplement the inadequacy of supplies they receive, teachers frequently dip into their own pocket, with 65% of the elementary respondents and 39% of secondary respondents spending $100 or more of their own money on teaching supplies.

Access to functioning equipment is also problematic. At best, about three-fourths of the respondents indicate that they have access to working equipment such as duplicating machines, a problem that increases in magnitude for those who have an insufficient

number of textbooks. Further, only about half the teachers at both levels have access to photocopying machines.

The Physical Environment

Despite problems with insufficient supplies, teachers generally find their school and classroom to be clean, as can be seen in Table 4. The exception is student restrooms. Nearly eighty percent of the respondents at both levels feel their school and classroom are kept clean, while only 50% of the elementary teachers and 40% of the secondary respondents feel the same about student restrooms. When asked whether the plumbing works in student restrooms, two-thirds to three-fourths responded that toilets work, and one-half to two-thirds indicate that sinks in student restrooms work.

Teachers also experience problems with cooling their classroom. Although this district is in a southern state, only half of the elementary respondents and less than half of the secondary respondents indicate that they have an air conditioned room. Forty-five percent of the secondary teachers help cool their room with portable fans. Of these, over half bring the fans from home. While heating classrooms is less of a problem, 28% of the elementary respondents and 54% of those at secondary schools said there are problems with the heating system.

With regard to health or safety hazards at the school, 38% of the elementary teachers and 46% of the secondary respondents indicate that unsafe conditions exist and named such problems as leaky roofs and slippery floors, sewerage back-ups, asbestos, mice,

termites, ants, and roaches. In one elementary school, the faculty driveway runs through the students' playground, creating an obvious hazard for students. Similarly, teachers were asked if the school were secure from trespassers. Of the elementary respondents, 69% say no, as do 73% of the secondary teachers.

Student Discipline

With regard to student discipline, 64% of the responding secondary teachers indicate that student behavior is a problem, as can be determined from Table 5. Abusive language or threats toward staff are frequent (69% indicate this occurs). In addition, 37% indicate that weapons are a problem and 28% said there are drug problems on campus. When asked if the principal supports teachers in discipline referrals made to the office, 74% say yes.

In response to a question about student suspensions, teachers indicate that students are more likely than not to be suspended for creating a disturbance at school or for threatening to harm staff (69% and 66%, respectively, agree that these offenses result in suspension). But, students have a reasonable chance of escaping suspension for directing obscenities at teachers (54% indicate that suspension results). Similarly, according to the respondents, students are not certain to face expulsion for physically harming a teacher (74% indicate expulsion occurs), bringing drugs to school (74% indicate expulsion occurs), or having weapons at school (81% indicate expulsion occurs).

Qualitative Analysis

To augment the quantitative data, qualitative data were

gathered through interviews held with a teacher leader, the union building representative, at six of the schools. The qualitative data support the quantitative findings.

Dimensions of Working Conditions

Faculty/staff relationships. Teacher leaders conceive of working conditions along two dimensions, faculty/staff relationships and physical conditions. Of the two, teachers emphasized faculty/staff relationships as more important, though this is an aspect of working conditions not considered in prior research. Because these teachers face severe shortages of textbooks and/or other materials, the willingness of their colleagues to share and to help locate materials is critical in making the school a "comfortable" place to work. In the same way, cooperation from the staff, the principal, and the students is also seen as important. Teachers describe this dimension of working conditions as follows:

> [To me, working conditions means] everyone who works in the building and the building itself, but the people are more important. (elementary school teacher)
>
> [I think of working conditions as] a certain environment, by this I mean people willing to work, people meaning faculty and staff, and students who are willing to do what's required of them. (high school teacher)

When asked to describe both the positive and negative aspects of working conditions at <u>their</u> school, teachers reiterated the importance of cooperation among the faculty and staff as the most positive aspect of the work environment. According to the teachers:

The biggest asset at this school is the teachers and the

> staff. If there's something you need, they come and give it to you, or suggest a way of getting what you need, or give you an alternative, so they are the biggest asset. (elementary school teacher)
>
> [The most positive thing about working here] is the people. We work in spite of the conditions. They are professionals, there is comraderie...teachers, children, custodial and cafeteria staff...everyone except the administrator. We support each other in discussions of methods, resources, and personal problems. (elementary school teacher)
>
> One of the positive things [about working here] is that the faculty has a good working relationship. When I first came here there were cliques.... [Now], we have come to respect each other and realize that we are here on the same mission, which is to educate kids. (high school teacher)

Not all of the comments about working relationships were positive. For example, one teacher commented that some of the custodial staff are reluctant dispose of trash bags from special education rooms where teachers of the handicapped change students' diapers. Although these diapers are placed in plastic bags which are tied closed, custodians fear contracting AIDS from handling the bags. The teacher seemed to have little patience with this problem, noting that the school exists to "serve <u>all</u> of the children" and that special education children are no more likely to have AIDS than those in regular classrooms.

Physical Conditions. Concerning the second dimension of working conditions, teachers also had much to say about the physical surroundings in which they work. Corroborating the quantitative findings, some teachers called conditions "horrible" and "horrendous." Two spoke of badly leaking roofs which require them and their colleagues to position trash cans and buckets around the classroom during a rain. In one of the schools, the leaks

damaged walls and floors. Similarly, another teacher described a fungus growing under the paint in the classroom making numerous, large bubbles along the wall. In addition, teachers at three of the schools spoke of fighting rodents, ants, termites and/or roaches. One teacher called the school "infested."

Teachers also commented on poor plumbing and student restroom facilities. At one school, a stench emanates from the restrooms. At another, the teacher complained that there are not enough working restrooms for the number of students at the school. Teachers also worry that students do not have sufficient toilet tissue. Rather than place the tissue in the restrooms, teachers are issued a pack of one-thousand sheet monthly. If the pack is used up before the end of the month, students and teachers are forced to supply their own.

Classroom temperatures are also a problem. In addition to being too hot in spring and fall, schools are also uncomfortable in winter. Thermostats are sometimes set to a standard temperature. Teachers regulate conditions in classrooms by opening windows and doors. On the other hand, at one of the schools teachers and students work in chilled classrooms on Mondays when weekend temperatures are cold. The reason suggested by the teacher is a district policy requiring that the heat be turned off during the weekend and prohibiting it from being turned on again early enough on Monday mornings to warm the school. Teacher leaders saw these problems as a function of bureaucracy and red tape.

The bureaucracy affects teachers and students negatively in

other ways as well. One teacher commented that knowing "the right thing to write on a requisition to get one thing fixed" is a problem. According to this teacher repair work is done only if it is requisitioned. The teacher explained that if repairs to a water fountain are requisitioned, and prior to the plumber's arrival, a second fountain also breaks, the plumber will fix only the one requisitioned; repairs to the second fountain must be requisitioned separately to be fixed. Other teachers complained of similar problems, noting that they repeatedly request repairs, books, and materials through the principal, but the requests go unheeded. Teachers acknowledge that they do not know where the breakdown occurs and are somewhat reluctant to blame the principal.

Effects of Working conditions on Classroom Teaching

Teachers at several of the schools also described the inadequate supply textbooks and instructional materials as "horrible." Teachers at four of the six school face extreme textbooks shortages. At three schools, teachers cannot gather enough texts for a classroom set so that multiple classes can share the same books.

Teachers manage in creative ways under these circumstances. Elementary teachers coordinate their teaching so that they can borrow books from each other. In the high school, teachers supplement lectures with outside speakers, projects, and videos. As found in the quantitative data, teachers use their personal money to pull together an academic program for the students when district resources are not forthcoming. Four of the six teachers

mentioned using their own funds to buy materials. According to one teacher:

> I have 29 students and enough books for 23 students, and that was the entire first quarter. The PTA provides us with so many reams of paper a month, and once that paper's gone and you don't have enough books, you have to have material for these kids to keep up, so you have to continually run off work. I go into my pocket to make copies. And people complain about how much money teachers make. (elementary school teacher)

When teachers were asked how these conditions affected their ability to do their job, they reiterated problems associated with the lack of books and materials. One social studies teacher mentioned that without books, students cannot see what life was like during different historical periods, noting "if you've never seen it, you can't picture it in your mind."

Contrary to the quantitative findings, most of these teacher leaders acknowledged feeling secure and safe at their school. Because of this they and their colleagues on the faculty can come early and stay late to complete preparations for class. However, one teacher whose school is on a major thoroughfare mentioned feeling unsafe at school because of trespassers.

Although there was much negative in what the teachers said, they were also quick to note the positive. Teachers have or have access to audio-visual equipment such as overhead projectors, tape players, televisions, and VCRs. In addition, four of the six teachers found the principal cooperative and even supportive. At one high school, the principal established an "administrative cabinet" composed of each department head, the union building

representative, a representative of the clerical staff, and an assistant principal. Two teachers also expressed that they were "lucky" to be at their school. Even though several of these teachers concede that there are problems at their school, they feel that the situation is worse at other schools.

In contrast to the quantitative findings, student discipline is not a problem in the perception of these teachers, with the exception of one high school. In fact, a teacher at one elementary school complimented the students for their honesty regarding lost items. The teacher attributed this in part to the recognition students get for turning in lost articles and money to the office. Several of these teachers also expressed a genuine caring for the students they teach, and concern that students might not get "as much factual information as they should" due to the textbook shortage.

When asked who bore responsibility for improving conditions in schools, answers were mixed. Two believe teachers are primarily responsible. But others think that the home, the administration, the board, and the people in general are responsible for the conditions found in schools. One elementary teacher put it this way:

> [Responsibility lies] first with the home because parents have to take an interest in the school...they have to speak up. Second, with the board; they have the money. And third with the teachers and staff. I put them last because they don't have as much power as the parents and the board. If we want things done, we have to tell parents to call the school board; this works.

Teachers' Beliefs about School Reform

In light of the inadequate conditions in which these teachers work, they were asked to describe what school reform means to them. The researchers' expectation was that reform might mean sufficient texts and materials, given the existing shortages. However, both high school teachers seem well versed in the current literature, commenting:

> School reform here would have to include making sure that everyone is involved in making decisions that would...make [ours] the best high school in the city. But the negative [aspect of reforms like school based management] is that not everybody is going to buy into it because not everybody wants to be responsible for making decisions or accepting the outcomes.

and

> We use the word loosely for site based management... collaborative school site administration. We need to tap resources within the school, ...to release teachers to tap into their individual talents. Teachers don't understand what school reform, school based management, and restructuring mean. They need staff development.... We need to educate teachers.

Elementary teachers were less willing to project a vision of reform. When asked "what comes to mind when you think of school reform?" one teacher responded:

> I've heard the term school reform so many times -- anything with this system.... [Whatever the reform is], it doesn't seem to work; it's never been tested, it's always a dream somebody has, but it's never really anything that's implemented and stays with you long enough. School reform would be a reorganization of everything that immediately touches me and my children.

Another saw it this way:

> I don't see any huge, major reforms. We have more computers. They talk about an overhaul, but in reality, I haven't seen it.

And a third said:

> [What comes to mind?] Improving students' test scores; that's what most of us think about.... For a while they concentrated so hard on individual skills to go along with test scores that a lot of learning...was just passed off.... We had so many different tests - teachers wound up teaching the superintendent's test, the state test, the national test.... All we did the whole month of March and April was test.

The frustration felt by these teachers at the elementary level comes through clearly in their responses. Reform is not a reality for them.

Perhaps one reason for the feelings expressed by the elementary teachers is the lack of confidence some have in the school board and central office. Teachers at both levels feel that neither board members nor top administrators are "really concerned" about conditions in schools. In the view of one secondary teacher, the failure of the board and central office to demonstrate concern for what happens in schools has negative repercussions for schools.

> Teachers put out a lot of effort to make classes presentable to students, and I think they would do a whole lot more if they had support from the board, but the board seems like they are more concerned with politics than what is going on with schools.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to consider working conditions in urban schools and the implications these conditions have for reform. Similar to other research (Bacharach et al., 1986; Ginsberg et al., 1987), teachers in this study detailed conditions more likely to inhibit student learning and school reform than to foster either. Still, it was clear that some teachers defied the inadequacies of their work environment -- they teach in spite of

leaking roofs, infestations of varmints, and inadequate supplies of textbooks and other materials. Indeed, when asked, teachers leaders in some of the schools defined working conditions not as their physical surroundings and teaching resources, but more in terms of their working relationships with colleagues and the school staff. These teachers seem to have already established the collegial relations urged by proponents of the current restructuring movement.

Considered from a broader perspective, however, the district in which this study was conducted does not produce large numbers of graduates who go on to college. Rather, test scores indicate that many of these students do increasingly more poorly the longer they stay in school, an outcome might be expected in this district given the poor working conditions. To expect students to do well on tests of factual information when they do not have books and materials is to fail to understand reality. For the restructuring agenda to be worthwhile, it is the students and teachers in this district and others like it who must reap the benefits. Ensuring that this happens is another matter.

Reform advocates such as Sykes (1988) urge that part of the restructuring movement include an emphasis on changing pedagogy so that the work of students as well as teachers becomes more intriguing. Pedagogy will be difficult to change in schools where a shortage of textbooks is not offset by access to other materials, where teachers see reform as distant and as 'someone else's dream,' and where teachers feel the school board and top administrators are

not concerned with what goes on in schools. The high profile status given current reform activities will not be sufficient to overcome the desperate conditions that exist in some schools. To overlook these conditions in the high-minded urgency of the reform movement may well ensure that change remains elusive.

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Table 1
Percent of Respondents Indicating When Textbooks Were Available

	Elementary	Secondary
First day	43%	39%
First week	24	22
Second week	8	10
After sec. wk.	24	29

Table 2
Percent of Respondents Indicating They Receive Sufficient Supplies and Have Access to Functioning Equipment

	Elementary	Secondary
Supplies		
Student desks	92	77
Paper & pencils	33	32
Duplicating mat'ls	50	55
Stapler, clips, etc	45	40
Art supplies	32	11*
Charts, maps	53	27*
Math supplies	71	22*
Science supplies	47	19*
Equipment		
A/V equipment	77	70
Duplicating equip.	77	68
Photocopying equip.	52	48

*Secondary teachers answered when applicable.

Table 4

Physical Conditions at Schools

	Elementary	Secondary
Percent of respondents rating school as clean		
Grounds	84%	84%
Halls, cafeteria	86	77
Students restrooms	53	35
Faculty restrooms	80	70
Classrooms	81	72
Percent of respondents indicating "major repairs" are needed in		
Electrical system	29%	36%
Plaster	29	37
Roof	25	30
Windows	18	29
Percent of respondents indicating the following work:		
Water fountains	64%	43%
Students' toilets	80	61
Students' sinks	66	55
Percent of respondents indicating how they cool their rooms		
Air conditioning	50%	39%
Ceiling fan	32	18
Other fans	34	45

Table 5

Student Discipline

Percent of respondents indicating that:	
Discipline problems are frequent	64%
There are weapons on campus	37
There are problems with drugs	28
Students use abusive language and threaten staff	69
Students are suspended for:	
Creating a major disturbance	69%
Obscene language directed toward staff	54
Threats of harm to staff	66
Students are expelled for:	
Physically harming staff	74%
Drug offenses at school	74
Weapons offenses at school	81